The LGBT Health and Inclusion Project

LGBT Identities and Learning Disabilities

Introduction

There is limited research around LGBT identities and learning disabilities, but research conducted by University of Bristol[1], evidences that LGB people with learning disabilities often face specific issues and barriers to support and inclusion.

Historical attitudes towards LGBT identities, such as the implementation and legacy of Section 28, which prevented all local authorities employees (including support workers) from 'promoting homosexuality' mean that learning disabilities services have not adequately responded to LGBT people with learning disabilities needs[2]. A department of Health Briefing suggests that current practice is more likely to limit opportunities for sexual relationships for LGB people with learning disabilities, rather than support them[3].

In addition, a lack of visible LGBT people with learning disabilities involved in the planning and provision of LGBT support services and the commercial scene, means that people with learning disabilities often find it difficult to be accepted in LGBT spaces. These two factors compound and result in double discrimination for LGBT people with learning disabilities.

Method

Based on the findings from national research, LGBT HIP hosted a roundtable and invited LGBT people with learning disabilities and workers from the LGBT sector and Learning Disabilities sector to explore:

- Where are the safe spaces for LGBT people with learning disabilities?
- What are the challenges for LGBT people with learning disabilities?
- What are the challenges for workers in LGBT/learning disabilities services?
- How might services better support people with learning disabilities?

LGBT HIP invited organisations to book places for LGBT people with learning disabilities, as well as workers from LGBT or Learning Disabilities Organisations. For this round table, only workers attended and no LGBT people with learning disabilities. This may be due to the meeting having to be rescheduled at short notice due to staff illness. Despite this, the roundtable was a useful exercise. Workers came from Brighton & Hove Speak Out, Allsorts Youth Project, the Adults Disability Team and the Community Learning Disability Team

---

[1] David Abbott, J. H. (2005). *Secret love, hidden lives?* Bristol: Noah Fry Research Centre.

[2] Jones, A. A. (2011). *Learning Disability Practice: Finding a safe space to explore sexual identity.*

[3] Department of Health (2007) *Briefing 13: Disabled lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people*

Findings

Where are safe spaces for LGBT people with learning disabilities?

The participants were asked to map spaces in Brighton & Hove that are (a) LGBT inclusive and (b) inclusive for people with learning disabilities. This visual exercise illustrates how people with who might experience multiple forms of discrimination can find it difficult to find spaces where all parts of their identity are accepted.

It is evident from *Figure 1* and *2*, that there is often ambiguity as to whether a space is safe and inclusive or unsafe and non-inclusive. The participants fed back that this is due to a variety of factors, including the level and visibility of a learning disability, visibility as an LGBT person and individual circumstances.

Figure 1 shows inclusive spaces for LGBT people include LGBT support services; police; health services; Brighton Pier and LGBT spaces/ Pride. On the other hand, it shows residential support services and places of worship as non-inclusive spaces.

Figure 1: LGBT Safe Spaces

Figure 2 shows day centres, places of worship, Brighton Pier and home as inclusive spaces. This map show more non-inclusive spaces than *Figure 1*. LGBT support services; police; LGBT spaces/ Pride; nightlife; public transport; work place and leisure centres were all deemed as non-inclusive by the participants.
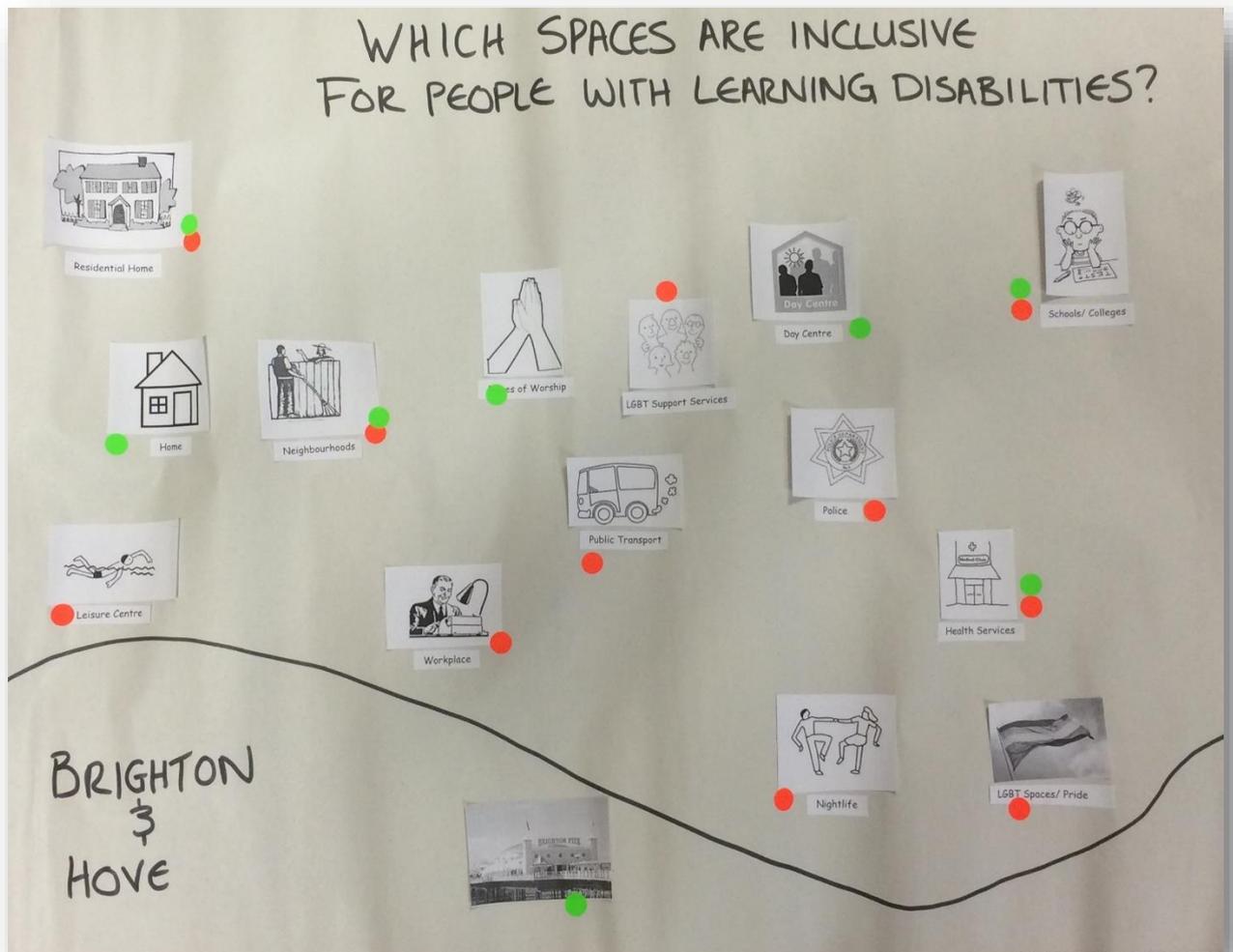

Figure 2: Learning Disabled Safe Spaces

These maps indicate a problematic conflict of safe spaces for LGBT people and people with learning disabilities. The maps clearly indicate that LGBT support and spaces are often not safe for people with learning disabilities and participants noted that the 'gay commercial scene' can often be homogenous and unwelcoming of difference. At the same time, residential homes and day centres were not considered LGBT-inclusive. This results in LGBT people with learning disabilities at risk of not having their needs met fully by LGBT services or learning-disabilities services.

Final Report – January 2015

Barriers for LGBT people with Learning Disabilities

Participants were asked to explore the barriers LGBT people with learning disabilities might face in accessing holistic support. Common themes have been summarised below:

Sex & Relationships

Participants reported that there is a lack of support for people with learning disabilities to access support around sex and relationships in general. This can includes misconceptions that all people with learning disabilities are asexual and that sexual urges generally are 'inappropriate'. Furthermore, participants discussed how people with learning disabilities can be infantilised which feeds into the notion that they would not need support around sex and relationships. Participants emphasised that this can be said for people with learning disabilities in general, and that LGBT people then face additional barriers. Participants identified risk of 'mate crime' and sexual or financial exploitation for people with learning disabilities in night-time venues, including the commercial gay scene.

Stigma

The stigma around learning disabilities can make it hard for people to disclose to LGBT support services that they have additional needs and stigma around LGBT identities can make it difficult to 'come out' to support workers.

Communication

Participants identified a lack of easy-read and accessible information online and in hard copy for LGBT people with learning disabilities. This includes information about local LGBT support as well as broader education about sexual orientation or gender identity. Invisibility of LGBT identities in care settings and of people with learning disabilities in LGBT settings was also identified as problematic.

Risk Assessments

Risk assessments and a risk-averse culture in care, were identified as a potential barrier to LGBT people with learning disabilities being able to explore their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Carers/ Workers

Participants identified attitudes and knowledge of carers as a possible barrier to LGBT people accessing support or social opportunities. This includes workers making 'best interest' decisions for service users, which may not respond to their needs as an LGBT person. Carers or workers also may not have knowledge of sexual orientation or gender identity or know how to respond to disclosures. In addition, LGBT people with learning disabilities are often reliant on carers to access the LGBT scene and shift patterns were identified as a barrier to staying out late. It was also noted that LGBT workers might not have the knowledge or confidence to support people with learning disabilities to access support or social opportunities.

Disclosing

Participants identified stigma and shame as reasons why LGBT people with learning disabilities may not come out to workers. Participants noted that the first time that people might be asked to consider or disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity may be when completing a monitoring form. This was identified as problematic as there is often not enough time to properly explore what this means.

Difficulties and Challenges for Workers

LGBT Services

Participants identified that workers in LGBT services have unmet training needs in disability awareness. They also cited time constraints and heavy workloads can be a barrier to meeting individual needs. Lack of knowledge and stigma around learning disabilities can be a barrier in LGBT services. Participants also noted the 'fear of getting it wrong' resulted in a lack of professional confidence to support people with learning disabilities. A major challenge identified for workers in LGBT services was using one form of communication instead of person-centred accessible communication methods.

Learning Disabilities Services

Participants identified a lack of LGBT-awareness and unmet training needs amongst some carers/workers in learning disability services. Again, 'fear of getting it wrong' and stigma around disabilities were cited as barriers to supporting LGBT service users. The participants also noted that there was a lack of opportunity to talk about sex and relationships and lack of confidence and expertise in responding to disclosures.   Another major barrier for carers and workers was the high influence of parents/ families in their relative's lives. Participants discussed how parents or carers attitudes towards LGBT issues can make it difficult for workers to support them to explore their identities. Participants also noted that the need for risk assessments and avoiding risk can delay, or prevent people with learning disabilities from exploring their sexual orientation or gender identity in an organic way.

Challenges for Workers

LGBT Services*:*

- Training needs
- Lack of time
- Stigma around LD
- Lack of confidence
- Fear of getting it wrong
- Respecting individuality
- Being used to one form of communication vs. accessible info

Learning Disabilities Services*:*

- Training needs
- Stigma around LGBT identities
- Parents or family involvement
- Lack of knowledge & expertise about LGBT identities
- Lack of opportunity to discuss
- Fear of getting it wrong
- Risk Averse

Figure 3: Challenges for Workers (Flipchart)

Further to this exercise, participants were invited to discuss how services might better support LGBT people with learning disabilities. The suggestions have been transcribed in *Figure 4*.

How can services better support LGBT people with Learning Disabilities?

<div style="border:1px solid #000; background:#e8e8e8; padding:1em;">

Next Steps:

- Peer forum/ support group
- Accessible information for people with learning disabilities about LGBT identities and support
- Broader sex and relationships education generally
- Making information accessible
- Increasing staff knowledge and understanding in LGBT service provision and learning disabilities
- Further meeting with more service providers and service users
- Advice on wellbeing for providers- include relationships
- Logistics for future group – venue, funding etc…
- Engaging service users

</div>

Figure 4: Next Steps

Conclusions

The primary conclusion from this roundtable discussion is that there are gaps in service provision from LGBT services and learning-disabilities services which fail to meet LGBT people with learning disabilities needs. It is clear that there are unmet training needs around disability- awareness for workers in LGBT services and vice versa.

In addition, there is a lack of spaces for LGBT people with learning disabilities to socialise and meet other LGBT people. The community mapping exercise showed that services and social spaces are not adequately equipped to respond to the needs of a person with learning disability who is also LGBT.

Stigma and shame around LGBT identities can make it difficult for people to come out in care settings and the same can be said for people disclosing learning disabilities in LGBT spaces.

A lack of accessible leaflets and information for LGBT people with learning disabilities has been identified, as well as paperwork in generic LGBT support services creating a barrier to access.

Participants felt that services could be improved through offered LGBT- awareness training and disability awareness training to relevant staff. They were also keen to explore the idea of a specific group or space for LGBT people with disabilities to meet and socialise.

Recommendations

This consultation has identified concerns around a lack of LGBT and disability awareness needs for workers, the need for a space for LGBT people with learning disabilities and the needs for easy-read literature and accessible information. It is hoped that the following recommendations may act as a guide for action.

1. *Training:* All staff in LGBT services should access disability-awareness training and workers in Learning Disability Services should access LGBT-awareness training to ensure that LGBT people with learning disabilities have their needs met.

2. *Group/ support for LGBT people with learning disabilities:* Service providers should consider working together to support LGBT people with learning disabilities to organise a group or space to meet people, socialise or explore LGBT identities.

3. *Accessible Communication:* LGBT service providers should take steps to ensure that easy-read versions of literature and communications are readily available.

Next Steps

Following recommendations from the roundtable, LGBT HIP will host a further meeting in 2015 to discuss how recommendations from this report can be taken forward.

Key Contacts

LGBT HIP Project Manager

Meg Lewis
Email: meg.lewis@switchboard.org.uk